



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ART AND PROGRESS

VOLUME I

JUNE, 1910

NUMBER 8

STAGE SCENERY AS AN ART

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

THE use of scenery as a part of the habitual and necessary equipment of the professional dramatic stage of the English-speaking peoples dates from 1660, when, upon the reopening of the theaters, after eighteen years of civil war, Sir William Davenant introduced it at the Duke of York's Theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields. But the sort of scenery with which the Restoration drama was invested, and which continued in use not only throughout the eighteenth century but even beyond the middle of the nineteenth, was merely a formal and conventional background for the action, offering little reference to actuality and affording hardly any opportunity for genuinely artistic development. Every set, whether it represented a landscape or a room indoors, consisted of a painted back-cloth, or drop, and of two or three wing-pieces, set in perspective on either side of the stage. In an outdoor set the actors merely walked about in front of a crudely painted landscape background. In an indoor set there could be no practicable windows or doors; and the actors had to enter the room by walking through the

walls. Only such furniture was used as was absolutely necessitated by the action, and this furniture was conventionally arranged. Most of the action was conducted in front of the line of the curtain, in the so-called "apron" of the stage, which projected between stage boxes upon either side. The "apron," which was a survival of the Elizabethan platform stage, was necessitated by the inadequacy of the existing means for illuminating the faces of the actors. The footlights had to be arranged in a wide arc which would concentrate the light in a focus at the center of the "apron," within which every important detail of "business" had to be enacted. On such a stage it was impossible to project the actors in intimate living relation with a scenic background worthy of the name of art. It was not until Madame Vestris assumed the management of the Olympic Theater in London, in 1831, that, as her husband, Charles James Mathews, tells us in his autobiography, "drawing rooms were fitted up like drawing rooms and furnished with care and taste; two chairs no longer indicated that two persons were to be seated, the two chairs being



"ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA"

COURTESY OF THE NEW THEATER

CLEOPATRA'S PALACE: DESIGNED BY MR. JULES GUÉRIN AND EXECUTED BY MR. ERNEST ALBERT

removed indicating that the two persons were *not* to be seated." Ten years later, at the first performance of Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance*, an exceedingly important innovation was introduced, namely, the so-called "box-set," whereby a room was represented by three walls built solidly upon the stage, and could be entered by real doors which turned upon their hinges. Several years afterward an epoch-making revolution in the scenic art was occasioned by the introduction, in rapid succession, of gas lamps, the calcium light, and electrical illumination. The invention of the electric light abolished the necessity for the apron-stage. The stage boxes were withdrawn to a position forward of the footlights; the latter were arranged no longer in a curving arc, but in a straight line immediately in front of the curtain; and the

proscenium, for the first time in the history of the theater, assumed the aspect of an enormous picture frame. The audience now naturally expected and demanded a picture to be set within the frame; and in this way arose the opportunity for the modern Drama of Illusion. During the last thirty or forty years the stage has become essentially pictorial in its basis of appeal; dramatists have learned to rely more and more upon their settings as media for the expression of many of their dominant ideas; and eminent graphic and decorative artists have been called into the service of the theater as collaborators of the dramatists. In the contemporary theater a finished production often owes nearly as much of its appeal to the designer of the scenery and costumes as it owes to the writer of the lines. But this state of



"THE COTTAGE IN THE AIR"

COURTESY OF THE NEW THEATER

CREEPER COTTAGE: DESIGNED BY MR. E. HAMILTON BELL AND EXECUTED BY MESSRS. UNITT AND WICKES

affairs has arisen only within the memory of the present generation of playgoers; and the art of designing stage scenery may, therefore, fairly be denominated the youngest of all the arts. This art is still so young, and is being developed so rapidly year by year, that it is as yet extremely difficult to formulate its leading principles. But three of these, at least, are certain to subsist through any future unfolding of the art; and these three may safely be formulated at the present time.

First of all, the scenic artist must always plan his set to meet the narrative exigencies of the action. This fact imposes on him many limitations to which the usual painter of landscapes or interiors is not submitted; but, as a compensation, it offers to him many suggestions at the outset of his work which

may prove stimulating to his instinct of invention. If a pistol is to be thrown through a window, as at the climax of *The City*, the window must be set in a convenient and emphatic place. If an important letter is to be written, a desk must be set in such a situation as to reveal the facial expression of the actor who is to write it. The number and the place of the doors to a room are conditioned by the narrative nature of the entrances; and the arrangement of trees and rocks in a landscape must conform to the needs of the actors in the traffic of the stage. The late Clyde Fitch, who always planned his own scenery, was exceedingly deft in devising settings that would aid the business of his narrative. In his last play, *The City*, he contrived a set for the first act that made it possible for him to conduct an extended and impor-



"THE NIGGER"

COURTESY OF THE NEW THEATER

THE GOVERNOR'S ROOM IN THE CAPITOL: DESIGNED BY MR. E. HAMILTON BELL AND EXECUTED
BY MR. HOMER F. EMENS

tant scene with no actors on the stage. He slanted a room so that two walls only were exhibited to the audience, one of which was pierced with sliding doors opening on a hallway which disclosed a flight of stairs leading to an upper story. The elder Rand, in the play, made an exit into the hallway, after which he was heard to drop heavily to the floor; and subsequently a hurried passing-by of many people in the hall, with sentences half-interjected through the opened doors, revealed to the audience that Rand had died suddenly of heart failure. On the other hand, in the production of *The School for Scandal*, at the New Theater, the setting of the screen scene was faulty because it hampered the business of the play. A staircase was devised elaborately to lead upward into the apartment of Joseph

Surface from an outer door imagined under the stage; and this staircase was so arranged that every actor at his exit was obliged to turn his back to the audience and launch his final line over his shoulder. Thereby the sharp wit of Sheridan's exit speeches was impaired. Even if the stairway had been turned about, the entrance speeches of the actors would have been discounted similarly by the concealment of their faces. The only logical conclusion is that the staircase, which is clearly implied in Sheridan's lines, should have been imagined off the stage, as it was in Sheridan's own day at Drury Lane, beyond an entrance door in the set itself.

The second duty, or opportunity, of the scenic artist—according as we view the case—is to make his set so conform to the mood of the play that it will reveal



"THE LILY"

COURTESY OF MR. DAVID BELASCO

THE MONKS' PARK: DESIGNED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF MR. DAVID BELASCO AND EXECUTED BY MR. ERNEST GROS

immediately, through its visual appeal to the audience, as much as possible of the essential nature of the action. Contemporary dramatists depend upon their scenery to localize their plays in place and time, and to suggest the emotional spirit in which the story must be viewed. What Shakespeare did in long descriptive passages of verse, like the first speech of the banished duke in *As You Like It*, or the exquisite description of a moonlit night which opens the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*, is now done, without any lines at all, by the artist who designs the scenery. Under modern conditions, the stage-set of a room may often be made visually descriptive of the character who is supposed to inhabit it. Thus, in the first act of *The Music Master*, the personality of the hero was revealed before his entrance by the aspect of

the room in which he lived—a shabby room in an East Side boarding-house, with a mantel-piece supplied with many knick-knacks which were marvelously selected to reveal the nature of the man who owned them. The duality of mood which dominates the whole play of *The Witch*, which has recently been presented at the New Theater, is indicated at the outset by the stage-set of the first act. This set exhibits a forlorn and barren landscape punctuated in the foreground by an apple-tree in full blossom; and the aspect of the setting suggests at once the general atmosphere of grave and grey New England which permeates the play, relieved only by the single florid figure of the young, impassioned heroine.

The third, and perhaps the most important, preoccupation of the modern scenic artist is to devise a set within

which the natural grouping of the actors at every moment of the play will arrange itself in conformity with the laws of pictorial composition. The leading lines of the stage picture should converge on certain points which may be utilized in the most important business of the act. In this exigency, which is similar to that which is submitted to by every master of graphic composition, the scenic artist is aided greatly by his ability to effect a mechanical focus of light upon any selected detail of his stage picture. Except in scenes imagined to progress in the full, unchanging light of noon, he may emphasize one section or another of the stage by the deft employment of electric lights. But, whenever this recourse to mechanics is denied him, he may accomplish his effect of emphasis by the graphic expedient of converging lines.

The four stage settings which are reproduced as illustrations of this article represent, in the opinion of the present writer, the best that has been accomplished in the scenic art during the present season in America. Mr. Jules Guérin's setting for the most important scenes of *Antony and Cleopatra* is beautifully spacious and wonderfully suggestive of the time and place of the story. It carries the spectator at once to Cleopatra's Egypt and suggests the epic grandeur of the action. Two critical annotations may, however, be ventured against it. First, the insistence upon vertical lines in the tall, gigantic pillars tends to dwarf the stature of the actors; and second, the rectilinear design does not admit a convergence of lines upon any point of the stage which will cast into relief the action which is carried on within it. Mr. Hamilton Bell's design for the second act of *The Cottage in the Air* is the most beautiful landscape which has been revealed in recent seasons on the American stage. It suggests an entire village of thatch-roofed cottages set in a hollow of hills rolling away to a far horizon dim-discerned; and, furthermore, it affords an emphatic convergence of lines upon the gateway in the center of the stage, which is thereby made a serviceable station for the actor. The same

artist's design for the last act of *The Nigger* is clearly localized in place. It exhibits the governor's room in the capitol of a Southern State, and presents a chaste and dignified example of the architecture of the imagined locality of the play. Furthermore, it casts into emphasis the two chairs which are to be utilized by the leading actors in the story and the central window through which the hero is to issue finally to make a momentous address to the throng in the public square below. The set for the first act of *The Lily*, devised under the direction of Mr. David Belasco, presents a lovely picture to the eye and effectively emphasizes the gateway through which the heroine is to enter; but the stage is somewhat crowded, the landscape is thereby divested of the sense of distance, and the stone seat in the center seems too obviously set there for the convenience of two actors who need it to conduct a dialogue.

It should be evident from these notes that the new art of designing stage scenery is very intricate and difficult, but that it offers possibilities for pictorial appeal which as yet have hardly been completely realized. The advantages of being permitted to render a picture in three dimensions instead of one, and of being allowed to alter the lighting of the picture almost at will, afford the followers of the new art obvious opportunities which are denied the ordinary painter; but the attendant difficulties of the art are great, because of the threefold limitation to which the scenic artist must evermore submit. The future of stage scenery as an art is veiled from the eyes of the present; but the probability is that it will attract more and more to its service artists who have won renown in the realm of purely pictorial representation.

Massachusetts has now the distinction of having an authorized Art Commission; the bill creating such a Commission which was introduced into the Legislature last winter having been passed and recently signed by the Governor.